

Prevention Pathways

Online Courses

FACT SHEET

Overview of Alcohol Abuse and Violence Against Women

Alcohol is the most widely used and abused substance in the United States.¹ Alcohol abuse and drug abuse create social, health, and other costs of huge proportions. More than 14 million people nationwide have alcohol problems in any given year.²

Violence against women is also a major problem. Women of every race, nationality, and income level are the victims of 2.7 million violent crimes each year.³ By understanding how the two problems are related, society can find ways to treat and prevent both alcohol abuse and domestic violence.

The Link Between Alcohol and Violence

Although alcohol abuse and violence often occur together, one does not *cause* the other.⁴ Alcohol or drug use can increase the risk of violence and can affect how often violence occurs and how severe it is. For example, a man with a quick temper or low frustration level may be more likely to act out his anger physically or verbally after he has had alcohol. Alcohol tends to lower a person's inhibitions. In other words, he may act before he thinks. Similarly, after drinking alcohol, a man who tends to express his anger in sexually controlling ways might rape or sexually assault a woman before stopping to think about his behavior. When sober, the same man may be more likely to think first.

Some abusive men use the excuse that substance abuse causes them to be violent. Although many men who abuse alcohol never become violent, nearly half of men who commit acts of violence against their partner also have alcohol abuse problems.⁵ They may become violent:

- To release feelings of stress, anger, or frustration,
- To avoid painful issues and shift blame, or
- To feel in control.

Alcohol or drug use is not just a risk factor for potential offenders. For a woman who is drinking, it may also increase her chances of becoming a victim of violence. A woman's judgment may be affected if she is drinking, which could lead her to engage in risky behavior or interfere with her ability to get out of a situation that may be dangerous. So, women that become victims of violence may actually use alcohol before they are ever victimized. They may also begin to use alcohol *after* the violence as a way of coping with the pain.

The Truth About Alcohol and Violence

Many people do not realize how powerful the effects of alcohol can be on their behaviors, actions, and even brain chemistry.

People may drink or use drugs:

- To escape stress, sadness, or depression,
- To appear confident, or
- To numb feelings of guilt, shame, anger, or loneliness.⁶

A number of myths exist about alcohol and its connection to violence. The following list attempts to separate fact from fiction:

Myth: *Drinking alcohol gives you more energy.*

Fact: Alcohol is actually a depressant. Alcohol slows down the central nervous system. After drinking just a small amount of alcohol, people tend to react more slowly, their judgment can become clouded, and they may be less coordinated.⁷

Myth: *Few women in the United States are alcoholics.*

Fact: The numbers of men and women affected by alcohol today are roughly equal. However, women tend to abuse prescription drugs much more than men.⁸

Myth: *As many men are affected by violence as women.*

Fact: More than 85 percent of all victims of intimate partner violence are women.⁹

Myth: *Children can't be hurt unless they are victims of violence.*

Fact: Children do not have to be physically hurt or even witness violence and substance abuse directly to feel the impact. They see the results. They also may hear parents scream, threaten, break things, or physically abuse.

At least 3.3 million children between the ages of 3 and 17 years are at risk of exposure to parental violence every year.¹⁰ Children exposed to domestic violence may have behavior problems, low self-esteem and depression,^{11,12} as well as poor school performance.¹³

Where to Go for Help

Many who abuse alcohol and are also violent are likely to deny that they have a problem. This denial can make family members feel hopeless. Every community has resources for alcohol prevention and treatment. There is no easy way to get an adult

(aged 18 and older) into treatment, but the following are some steps that family and friends can take to help:

- Stop rescuing the person when he or she gets into trouble. The person needs to suffer the consequences of drinking.
- Talk seriously to the person when they are sober, but do so immediately after an incident, so that the event or problem is fresh in their minds. Be specific so there is no confusion.
- Talk to a counselor for information and referrals.
- Be ready to help. Be prepared with information about Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or community resources. Be willing to accompany the person to an AA meeting or initial meeting with a therapist, if necessary.

For more information, go to www.samhsa.gov/preventionpathways and click on "courses" to find Module 1 of the online course, "It Won't Happen to Me: *Substance Abuse and Violence Against Women.*"

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